NBA

The Shot Doctor

Behind the scenes in San Antonio, there's Chip Engelland — the man who has been quietly improving the Spurs' offense

BY **BILL BARNWELL** ON APRIL 24, 2014 | PRINT

On Tuesday, Gregg Popovich was named NBA Coach of the Year, becoming just the third person in league history to receive the Red Auerbach Trophy three times. His team went a league-best 62-20, without a single player averaging 30 minutes per game and after an offseason in which the Spurs lost Popovich's two primary assistants. Their biggest addition was Bulls backup wing Marco Belinelli, who ended up logging the second-most minutes of anybody on the roster, at a significantly higher level of play than he had ever exhibited.

Popovich and general manager R.C. Buford clearly deserve tremendous credit for building a perennial championship contender, but Belinelli's success brings another piece of the Popovich-Buford puzzle out of the shadows: Spurs shooting coach Chip Engelland. He has made a career out of molding shooters, and Belinelli is his latest star pupil. Engelland was the guru who built Shane Battier's 3-point stroke at Duke and refined Grant Hill's outside shot during Hill's run in Detroit, but he's come to find a home in San Antonio, where he has dramatically affected a number of players' careers as a shot doctor over the past nine years. The Spurs thrive in obscurity, and nobody exemplifies that more than Engelland, the team's secret weapon.[1]

Engelland's career as an NBA shooting coach started well before his time in San Antonio. While he's now known for his ability to reconstruct a player's shot, he actually began by helping an old friend … who just happens to be one of the greatest shooters in league history.

Project I: The Marksman

Chip Engelland was hardly a shooting slouch in his own right. After starring during his time at Pacific Palisades High School in California, Engelland went on to Duke, where he took advantage of a 17-foot-9-inch 3-point line to shoot 55.4 percent from behind the arc his senior year. After he graduated, Engelland bounced around the CBA and the 76-inches-and-under World Basketball League, and became a legend in the basketball hotbed of the Philippines before retiring. Engelland, in fact, became a naturalized citizen of the Philippines and played for their national team (sponsored inimitably as San Miguel Beer) in the 1985 Jones Cup, where Engelland dropped 43 points on a Gene Keady-coached United States team in a double-overtime thriller.[2]

During Engelland's time at Palisades, an eighth grader by the name of Steve Kerr was watching him from the stands. (He wasn't the only notable NBA character in the stands there, either; Lakers president Jeannie Buss was the team's scorekeeper and Engelland's girlfriend.) After Engelland graduated, Kerr took over the starring role on the team. Later, Engelland would coach Kerr's summer league teams before Kerr headed off to play at Arizona.

They didn't reconnect until the 1993-94 season. Kerr was in the middle of a shooting slump and went to dinner with his wife and

Engelland. His high school predecessor noted that since Kerr had a sore knee that was affecting his balance, he'd do well to widen his base.

Engelland didn't remake Kerr's shot — he didn't need to — but he became a trusted voice for keeping Kerr's fundamentals solid, while making minor changes to Kerr's already-legendary stroke. "It was very subtle," Kerr told me, "but before I started working with [Chip], the ball rolled more off my middle finger than my index finger. He taught me to spread my hands out a little wider on the ball and use my index fingers more." Kerr says that switch made him a more consistent shooter by allowing him more control over his shot and making it far less likely that the ball would slip and roll off his pinky fingers. It's hard to imagine that tiny shift of weight even being perceptible to an observer, but Kerr noted that Engelland is capable of seeing things in a shooter's motion that even Kerr, the league's most accurate 3-point shooter ever, wouldn't notice.

"He understands that a big part of shooting is the shooter's mind," Kerr said, and a moment toward the end of Kerr's career provided such an example. With Kerr playing reduced minutes in Portland as a 36-year-old during the 2001-02 campaign, he found himself struggling to stay loose for meaningful shooting opportunities. Kerr told Engelland about his problem and the shooting expert flew up and offered a solution: a 30-minute, seven-shot workout. Kerr and Engelland would sit alone on the bench in the Portland practice facility after everybody else had left. Engelland would ask Kerr to tell him what was going on with his kids or even leave him to read a newspaper. After a few minutes, Engelland would shout at Kerr to go, and the two would sprint off the bench and set Kerr up for a single 3-point attempt from the wing before returning to the bench. Repeat six more times and you've got the league's most unlikely — and simultaneously most logical — shooting workout. A typical shooting coach, Kerr said, would have noted his struggles and told him to take 200 shots from a variety of spots to try to regain his physical rhythm. Instead, Engelland put himself in Kerr's shoes to help refresh Kerr's mental timing.

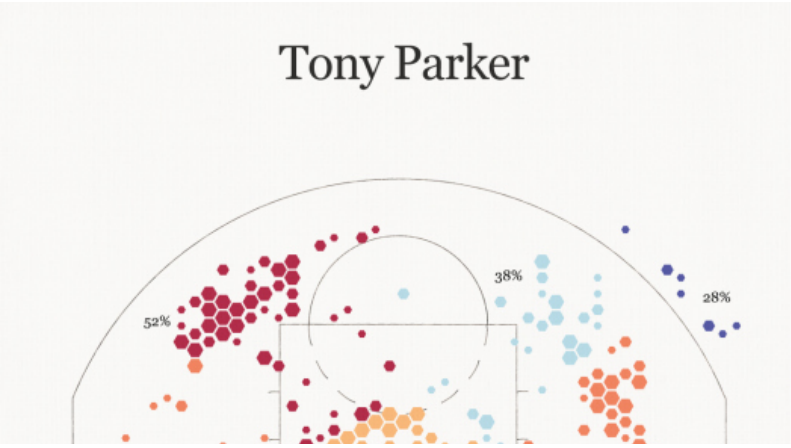
Project II: The Phenom

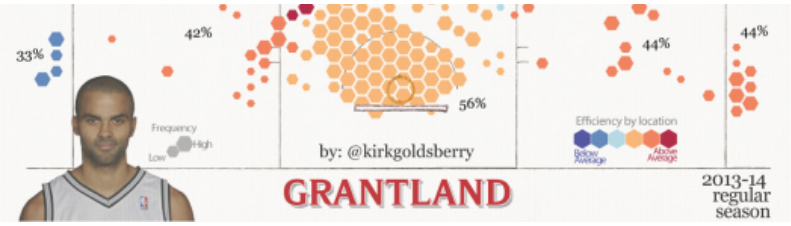
Tony Parker was an unknown quantity when the Spurs drafted him out of France with the 28th pick of the 2001 draft; as Charles Barkley famously put it shortly after the selection, "I don't know that much about him, but if they got him in the first round, he must be a good player." Parker became an immediate starter in the league during his rookie season at just 19 years old, and he dazzled with his speed and ability to get to the rim, but his game had one huge hole: his outside shot. "I couldn't hit a shot at the beginning of my career," he told the *Houston Chronicle*. Parker's struggles led defenses to leave him open in key situations, and the pressure led Popovich to lean on backup Speedy Claxton over his starting point guard late in games during the 2002-03 Finals against the Nets. The following offseason, the Spurs even made a serious run at Nets point guard Jason Kidd in free agency, a move that likely would have ended Parker's tenure in San Antonio.[3] We all know how that worked out, but by the time Engelland joined the Spurs in 2005, the missing outside shot remained the obvious hole in Parker's game. He would become Engelland's first pet project in Texas.

Again, the fix seems impossibly simple in hindsight. Chris Ballard covered Engelland's work with Parker in his excellent book *The Art of a Beautiful Game*:

> In Parker's case, the first thing Engelland noted was that while his form was exemplary on his one-handed runners and teardrops, Parker held the ball differently on his jump shot. Rather than keeping his right hand under the ball, Parker had it slightly higher up. So, beginning with training camp in the fall of 2005, Engelland reconstructed Parker's shot, moving his right hand down, his right thumb out to widen his grip, slowing down his motion and even changing his release point.

The changes had an instant impact. Ballard notes that Parker had shot 34.5 percent on his attempts outside the paint during the previous season; in his first year working with Engelland, Parker shot 39.7 percent on those same attempts. His midrange shooting percentage improved from 39.3 percent to 41.6 percent, and by 2008-09, it was all the way up to 45.5 percent. Parker's more recent shot charts show how effective he can be in the midrange game, as he has been for the Spurs in 2013-14.





Engelland insisted that Parker take the 3-point shot out of his game, and he has; after averaging nearly 200 3-pointers per season during his four seasons in the league without Engelland — and hitting on just 31.5 percent of them — Parker has averaged just over 56 3-point attempts per season since. He's also become a much better free throw shooter, having hit 69.7 percent of his free throws before Engelland changed his shot and 77.2 percent of his freebies since.[4] Altogether, since Engelland came to San Antonio, the only guard who has hit a higher percentage of his 2-point shots than Parker is Steve Nash.[5] Chip Engelland might very well be the difference between Tony Parker, very good point guard, and Tony Parker, future Hall of Famer.

Project III: The Prospect

Kawhi Leonard made the old Tony Parker look like a long-lost Korver brother. As DraftExpress noted before the 2011 lottery, virtually every one of Leonard's shooting metrics from his time at San Diego State were abysmal. Among the 17 wing prospects the site evaluated before the draft, Leonard was 15th in points per possession, 16th in points per shot on jumpers, 15th in points per possession on isolations, and dead last in adjusted field goal percentage. He shot just 32 percent on catch-and-shoot jumpers and 28 percent on pull-ups. While Leonard was still considered a talented player and was only 19 on draft day, his primary contributions at the professional level — at least at first — were expected to come from his defense, effort, and rebounding. (Miss you, Pruiti!)

The Spurs saw a lot of things they liked in Leonard, but they happened to have a coach who could fix the part of his game that nobody liked. Engelland doesn't discuss the particular players he's working with, but it's fair to assume that the Spurs evaluated Leonard's game closely and felt confident that Engelland could improve his shot before the team traded George Hill to the Pacers for Leonard's draft rights.

The night after the draft, Leonard rushed to Texas for his first shooting session with his new coach. There was good reason for Leonard's haste; the league was about to lock out its players, meaning that Engelland had just 72 hours to work with his new charge before he would be forced to cease all contact. First they altered Leonard's release point, shifting it from a spot over Leonard's head to one in front of his face. They drilled the new shot for a couple of days before the lockout hit, at which point Leonard was stuck familiarizing himself with his new mechanics by himself in Las Vegas and San Diego.[6]

Leonard's effort was well worth it. The new mechanics stuck, and Leonard has been an offensive asset ever since, especially during last year's playoffs. To put what he's done in context, consider that Leonard shot an even 25 percent (41-for-164) on his 3-point attempts during his two years at school. Despite the presence of pro defenses and the extra three feet between the NBA's 3-point line and its college equivalent, Leonard has improved his 3-point shooting in the pros, hitting 37.6 percent of his 465 3-point attempts through three seasons. Sports-Reference.com's college basketball site has full-career data for NCAA players going back through the 1999 season. Since that time, no player who took 150 3-pointers in college before taking the same number of 3s in the pros has improved their shooting percentage on triples more than Kawhi Leonard has:

Player	College 3Pt%	Pro 3Pt%	% Improvement
Kawhi Leonard	25.0%	37.6%	+50.4%
Mo Williams	29.4%	38.5%	+30.95%
Khris Middleton	32.1%	40.0%	+24.6%
Patty Mills	33.1%	40.6%	+22.7%
Reggie Williams	30.2%	37.1%	+22.8%

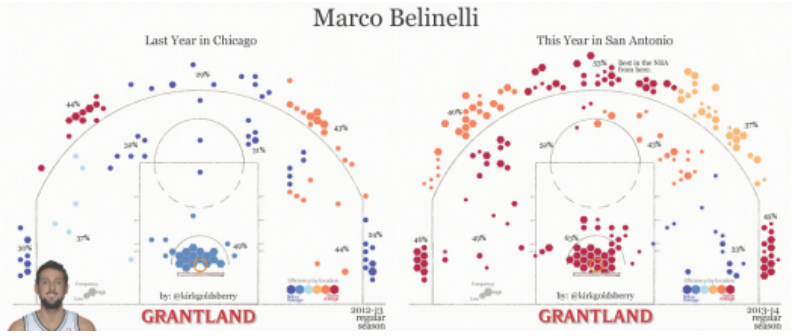
Project IV: The Journeyman

The line to sign Marco Belinelli this past offseason couldn't have been very long. Belinelli, who was already about to join his fifth team after just six seasons in the league, hadn't offered much during his lone season in Chicago, where he helped fill in for the injured Derrick Rose. Perhaps owing to the effort Tom Thibodeau shouts and grimaces out of every Bulls player on defense, Belinelli posted a .460 effective field goal percentage during his season with the Bulls, his lowest as a pro. The Bulls preferred to bring Mike Dunleavy back to town in Belinelli's place, leaving him to hit the free-agent market. He signed a two-year, $5.6 million deal with the Spurs to serve as a reserve guard and shooter, replacing restricted free agent Gary Neal, who wasn't retained by the

team.[7] Expectations were deservedly low.

And then, as we probably should have expected all along, Belinelli broke out. It's hard to find a category where he isn't having his best season. He has stayed healthy and played 80 games for the first time in his career, logging more minutes than ever, but he has simultaneously become a far more efficient scorer in all those minutes. Belinelli hit 44 percent of his 2-pointers before arriving in San Antonio; this year, he has hit a whopping 52.5 percent of those shots. That's the sixth-best rate in the league for a player of Belinelli's size or smaller. And after finishing 51st out of 86 in the league in 3-point percentage a year ago (among guys with 100 or more attempts) by converting 35.7 percent of his shots from beyond the arc, not only did Belinelli hit a full 43 percent of his 3s this past year, he won the 3-point shootout during All-Star Weekend. He would have needed a ticket or a television to watch the contest that time a year ago, let alone participate.

Some of the improvements Belinelli has made since arriving in San Antonio are undoubtedly a product of the Spurs' offense getting him open looks and funneling him into places where he takes smarter shots. But while Belinelli's shot charts from the past two years (courtesy of Grantland colleague Kirk Goldsberry) reveal a player who is taking different shots, they also reveal one who has been a significantly better shooter almost regardless of where he's taking them:



It's hard to even envision that those two charts could be of the same player, let alone in consecutive seasons. After really exhibiting competency only from the wings last year, Belinelli has become the league's best shooter from the top of the arc and an efficient contributor from either corner. Watch this clip of his 32-point game against the Knicks this year and you get a good idea of how the Spurs use Belinelli when things are going well for him; virtually everything is catch-and-shoot, and unsurprisingly, considering the opposition, most of the shots are open ones.

In this case, it might be more remarkable to note the changes Engelland hasn't made; namely, he's resisted the urge to rebuild Belinelli's shot and allowed him to retain much of his old motion, with Belinelli often leaning away from the basket like some tiny, abbreviated Dirk Nowitzki impersonation. Instead, inverting the Parker story, Belinelli has taken 3s more frequently, been better at hitting them, and has come to dominate in the paint; after hitting just 90 of 177 layups (50.8 percent) in 2012-13, Belinelli's converted 91 of 124 layups (73.4 percent) in 2013-14.

Value

So, if Engelland can have this dramatic of an impact upon his charges' shooting ability, how much is he worth to the Spurs? It's impossible to come up with an exact figure, but let's throw an estimate out there based upon his work with Belinelli. Before the season, ESPN Insider Kevin Pelton's SCHOENE projection system used Belinelli's prior performance to suggest that he would hit 44.0 percent of his 2-pointers and 39.4 percent of his 3s. Belinelli instead shot 52.5 percent from 2 and 43.0 percent from 3.

By the end of the year, Pelton's numbers had Belinelli down for 3.6 WARP (wins above replacement player). Virtually all of that comes down to Belinelli's shooting; if Pelton replaced Belinelli's actual shooting rates with the figures he projected for Belinelli before the season, Belinelli's WARP falls all the way down to 0.2, leaving him as basically roster filler. According to Pelton's research, teams pay about $1.6 million for each win in free agency, meaning that the improvement between Belinelli's preseason projection and his actual performance this year has been worth around *$5.4 million*. Engelland isn't solely responsible for all of that, since the offense helps get Belinelli better shots and the Italian actually has to line up and drain them, but is Engelland responsible for, say, 20 percent of that improvement? That would make Engelland worth more than $1 million to the organization, and that's solely considering his work with Belinelli. Factor in Leonard's transformation and the figure starts rising dramatically. Engelland might quietly be one of the most undervalued assets in basketball.

Furthermore, his presence on the staff allows general manager R.C. Buford and the San Antonio player personnel department to pursue players, like Leonard, who are undervalued because of their shooting woes, knowing that they have the league's best shot doctor on staff to improve things. It wouldn't be a surprise if Engelland was involved at some level in the target identification process, recommending players he might be able to fix. That creates a perpetual advantage that goes beyond one player and one shot. Just as Engelland rebuilt Parker's shot and helped create a team cornerstone, he has built one again in Leonard. After

turning Gary Neal into a deadeye shooter from 3, he built Belinelli into San Antonio's latest spot-up monster on the cheap. There will always be another player for the Spurs to rebuild and improve. Fortunately for San Antonio, though, there's only one Chip Engelland.

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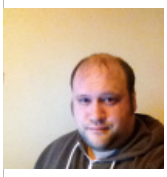

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